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A clear vision
Hewson family furthers outdoor program

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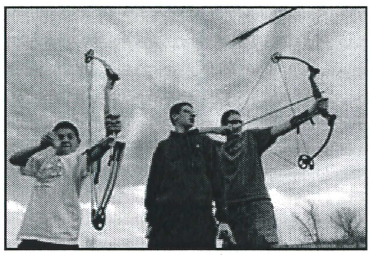

Adrian Bugarin, 10, left, and his brother Arturo Bugarin, 14, shoot at targets with their friend Grant Blair, 15, at Colorado Youth Outdoors' new property at Swift Ponds near Windsor. The group has been coming from Greeley to take advantage of the recreational opportunities at the site. Reporter-Herald/Christopher Stark

Cheryl Blair pulled back the string on her bow, sighted with her left eye and let an arrow fly.

It pierced the target just where she wanted.

"I've never shot one until a week ago," the Greeley woman said, beaming at her 15-year-old son, Grant, who awaited his turn during archery practice.

Through Colorado Youth Outdoors, a program started in Loveland to share outdoor experiences among local families, Blair shares parts of her son's life she otherwise wouldn't be able to experience, physically or financially.

"I'm on oxygen," she said, pointing to a portable pack. "I've had arthritis since I was 17. I'm not exactly mobile."

She cannot hike into mountainous areas but she can drive to Swift Ponds, a natural area just off Interstate 25 north of Windsor, and experience the great outdoors with her son.

Since the early 1970s, the Swift Ponds area has been a haven for groups to share the outdoors with children who may not otherwise get that experience.

Now, Swift Ponds are owned by Colorado Youth Outdoors, which plans to build a shooting range, pavilion, classrooms and offices on the property. The Loveland-based nonprofit is in the midst of raising $6 million for the project — the first of seven campuses it hopes to create across Colorado.

"It's about sharing a vision," said Loveland resident Bob Hewson, who founded Colorado Youth Outdoors with his brother Tom seven years ago.

Their initial vision was sharing with others the family outdoor experiences they

had as children. The Hewsons started by introducing after-school curriculum in Loveland for parents and children, and the program has grown to encompass 10 schools in the region.

"We didn't have any money, but we had a vision," Hewson said.

Their most recent vision — the campus at Swift Ponds — does have some money thanks to several donors. But about $4.7 million is still needed to complete their plan.

Louis Swift, a Fort Collins Realtor who designed the ponds for youths, specified in his will that his land was to be given to a nonprofit. In October, four years after his death, Swift's children gave the land to Colorado Youth Outdoors.

"We paid $10 for 213 acres," Hewson said. However, a small chunk of adjacent land, an additional 27 acres, belonged to Swift's widow and was not part of the gift.

She sold the land to Colorado Youth Outdoors for $1.2 million, which the organization paid for with a grant from Gates Family Frontiers Fund.

With the land secured, Colorado Youth Outdoors is now raising another $4.8 million to pay for new buildings. Of that, the group has $50,000 from the Erion Foundation and $25,000 from Anheuser-Busch.

The first project, a 150-seat pavilion that looks over one of 12 ponds, will be built this year with the Erion Foundation grant.

The next piece, a $1.4 million shooting center where participants can shoot at clay targets outdoors and with .22-caliber rifles indoors, is planned for 2009.

The following year, 2010, will see the construction of a $1.5 million classroom and office building.

The plans also call for a $1 million endowment to maintain and manage the property, home to a plethora of birds, 25 species of fish, beavers, muskrats and more.

Eventually, Colorado Youth Outdoors hopes to spread into as many of the state's 354 high schools as it can and open six more campuses like the one in progress at Swift Ponds.

"We're right off I-25," Hewson said. "That's our neighbor, yet, you would never know this is here, a sanctuary, so to speak. ... We can have Mother Nature at its finest right next to I-25."

Louis Swift built that sanctuary, and his son, Chase, said he would be ecstatic to see how Colorado Youth Outdoors is using his legacy to build its own.

"American tradition is about hunting and fishing and being outdoors with family," Chase Swift said. "I think it's critically important.

"The time out here is paid back many, many ways. It's relationships."

For Blair, the property and program add another dimension to her relationship with her son.

She appreciates the expert instruction, the equipment and the facility Colorado Youth Outdoors provide.

And she saves her vacation hours to leave work early on Wednesdays and participate in the classes and outdoor experiences with her son.

"He's going to remember I was out there doing the challenges, standing side by side," she said.

"Everything we do, it's a memory maker."

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